



# Art of a Humanist Hue

Papers presented at a seminar organised

by North East Humanists

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at

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 North East Humanists

[www.northeast-humanists.org.uk](http://www.northeast-humanists.org.uk)

From cave to classical, religious to secular, romantic to modern, art has always reflected the historical and cultural and context in which it was created. But is there any art that reflects Humanist ideas and values? It was the question addressed at our seminar on the afternoon of Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> January, held at Bensham Grove Community Centre in Gateshead. An appropriate venue; Bensham Grove has a rich artistic heritage. The former home of Victorian philanthropists Robert Spence and Elizabeth Watson, it is a Grade 2 Listed Building, with many original features including stained glass windows, fireplaces, tiles and decorated ceilings, all from the Arts and Crafts era. William Morris and some of the Pre-Raphaelite painters were welcome visitors to Bensham Grove and their influence can be seen throughout. Known as 'The Settlement', it is now a busy community centre attracting diverse groups, many of which engage in a range of creative activities on offer.

The seminar took place in the splendid setting of the library. It began with an overview of the Centre and its work by Community Bridgebuilder Christine Frazer.



There were then eight on-screen presentations of art works, chosen by individuals to exemplify Humanist values. The outcome was an eclectic and diverse catalogue.

**‘Strawberry Thief’, a William Morris (1834 – 1896) design printed on a shopping bag, presented by John Dobson.**



“We sometimes think of art as providing different ways of seeing things. For example, sunflowers, Rouen Cathedral, prostitutes in Rue Avignon (the main red-light district of Barcelona). But I want to talk not about great pictures like these, but about this shopping bag.

There are two humans who have collaborated in making this shopping bag: the fabric designer — we know who that was, it was William Morris and this is one of his best-known designs (Strawberry Thief). The other is the totally unknown shopping bag designer, who chose the fabric and, just as importantly, all its construction details – positioning, sewing, size, reinforcement, etc. I have separated the two aspects of beauty and utility

(the fabric is beautiful and the design is useful) and claim that both are important from a humanist point of view. A Humanist point of view should consider all the relations between all the creators of an artefact and the artefact itself and those who participate in its existence.

Other examples of these largely unconsidered relations are William and Catherine Blake, Henri Matisse and Madame Lydia, and the Covid Memorial Wall on London's South Bank. These relationships are all human, and should therefore have a place in a Humanist approach to art; because they are examples of the general Humanist principle of placing human welfare and fulfilment at the centre of artistic and ethical and practical decisions concerning autonomy and equality."

**A fourteenth fresco depicting 'Good government in the City' by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1290 – 1348), from Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, was chosen by Liz Armstrong.**



“This 14<sup>th</sup> century fresco is one of a series of four, painted between 1337 and 1339 in the rooms of Siena's Palazzo Pubblico. The four frescoes stand as the first and only secular paintings of Siena's early renaissance period.

How did this come about, at a time when the fabulous painting and sculpture of the Italian renaissance was exclusively religious? Artists strove for perfection to pay appropriate homage to God; those commissioning work were similarly driven.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Siena was a powerful state consisting of the city of Siena and the surrounding countryside. The governing political party of the time commissioned Ambrogio Lorenzetti to paint frescoes in the room where the politicians met, which would remind them of the importance of their work.

The result is remarkable. On one wall, two frescoes are arranged side by side.

One shows the effect of good government on the city of Siena (see image) and the other the effect on the surrounding countryside. In the city, buildings are well maintained and there is some active building going on, the clean and ordered streets are full of people buying and selling. Students attending a school are attentive whilst other young people have time for some leisure, dancing in a circle.

The other (not shown) depicts a well administered countryside yielding ample crops, fruit and livestock to ensure there will be no famine.

On an adjacent wall a similar arrangement shows the effect of bad government on city and countryside. The city is in ruins, houses are alight, the streets are full of rubble, there is violence, and rape. The countryside is barren and land is not being cultivated.

I chose this work first, because of its secular nature, so unusual in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and second because the clear message it gives to the Sienese politicians that their decisions matter, chimes with the Humanist adage Think for yourself; Act for others."

**John Sargent displayed an untitled piece by American Neo-Expressionist artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960 – 1988)**



“Jean-Michel Basquiat was a pioneering figure in the world of contemporary art. His work broke through the boundaries of traditional art forms and explored themes of identity, race, and politics.

He challenged conventional narratives and advocated for the recognition and empowerment of marginalised communities.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1960, he was brought up as a Catholic by Puerto Rican mother and Haitian father.

After dropping out of school, Basquiat began writing cryptic, poetic messages and drawing odd symbols across New York with a friend named Al Diaz.

They formed the street-art collective SAMO: an acronym for ‘Same Old Shit’ with which the pair would tag their street



pieces. Basquiat developed the pseudonym SAMO© while working on a comic.

It was about a young character searching for truth and spirituality, but who instead meets a false priest who attempts to sell him different types of religion: Judaism, Catholicism, and Buddhism.

Finally, the pseudo-religion SAMO takes hold of the character who lives under the dictum: 'SAMO is everything, everything is SAMO. SAMO, the religion without guilt and much more.'

In the late 1970s, his graffiti gained prominence for its raw, passionate, and politically charged content, frequently addressing issues of race, identity, and social justice.

His works quickly elevated from the streets to galleries. In 1982, he had his first solo exhibition in New York. It was both a commercial and critical success, marking a turning point in his career.

His hybrid style included a blend of graffiti, street, and fine art. He quickly gained critical acclaim, and exhibited in major institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Guggenheim Museum.

Basquiat used his art to address pressing issues of the time, including police brutality, racism, and inequality.

His 1983 painting *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)* was a direct response to the death of a young black artist in police custody after being arrested for spray-painting in a New York City subway station. The painting delivers a powerful statement on the systemic violence against black bodies.

He often used bold, bright colours and gestural brushstrokes, creating a sense of movement and energy in his paintings. This approach allowed him to capture the spirit and vitality of the communities he was representing, as well as the emotions and experiences of individuals within them.

Basquiat's legacy as an artist extends far beyond his remarkable skill and iconic imagery.

Through his work he inspired social change and activism, creating a platform for underrepresented voices and challenging the status quo.

In tackling issues from racial injustice to class inequality, he encouraged viewers to question their own assumptions and biases.

By bringing these issues to the forefront of the art world, Basquiat helped to create a space for underrepresented voices to be heard.

His work continues to encourage conversations around race and identity politics in art, challenging viewers to consider their own role in promoting social justice and equality.

For me, Basquiat represents some of the finest traditions of Humanism – albeit of a radical and very progressive kind.

He questions the status quo, and, in tackling issues around injustice and inequality, he is appealing for a fairer, kinder world.

He is highly empathetic: he identifies painfully closely with the experiences of others.

He asks questions: of society, art and the status quo, before making up his own mind.

'I don't listen to what art critics say,' he said. 'I don't know anybody who needs a critic to find out what art is.'

He was fearless in his attacks on power structures and systems of racism.

His legacy has inspired many artists of colour to follow in his footsteps, using their art as a tool for activism and change.

Basquiat changed the art world, but his influence transcended art. He anticipated – perhaps even sowed some seeds – for seismic social change, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement.

Standing in front of one of his paintings, the viewer cannot claim ignorance.

This picture is Untitled, from 1982. It sold for \$110.5 million at Sotheby's in New York in 2017. The sale made Untitled one of the ten most expensive works of all time."

**Les Milne presented 'The Fourth Estate' by Italian painter Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo (1868 – 1907)**



“This is a picture of an oil painting called The Fourth Estate by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo. It is displayed in the Gallery of Modern Art in Milan.

That isn't where I saw it, in fact I've never seen the original. What I have seen is a print in what was Don Vito's restaurant in Pilgrim Street Newcastle, where we'd often have a family Saturday lunch in the late 80s and early 90s.

I was intrigued by the picture and for many years I thought it depicted one of my heroes Giuseppe Garibaldi (4 July 1807 – 2 June 1882), who played a key role in the Unification of Italy and famously wore a red shirt. I later learned that he had links with the radical Newcastle MP Joseph Cowen whose friends were a who's who of European political revolutionaries and thinkers. Garibaldi

being the foremost military and political figure of Italy and a national hero, visited Cowen on Tyneside and was feted by the Geordie public. He was also admired in the Midlands as evidenced by the red strip worn by Nottingham Forest.

Garibaldi supported the creation of a European federation. This idea is apparent in a letter he wrote, which when reflecting on this week's events his words seem eerily prescient.

'The progress of humanity seems to have come to a halt...

The reason is that the world lacks a nation which possesses true leadership. Such leadership, of course, is required not to dominate other peoples, but to lead them along the path of duty, to lead them toward the brotherhood of nations where all the barriers erected by egoism will be destroyed. We need the kind of leadership which, in the true tradition of medieval chivalry, would devote itself to redressing wrongs, supporting the weak, sacrificing momentary gains and material advantage for the much finer and more satisfying achievement of relieving the suffering of our fellow men. We need a nation courageous enough to give us a lead in this direction. It would rally to its cause all those who are suffering wrong or who aspire to a better life.'

Garibaldi had long been critical of the papacy and shortly before he died, in 1882 he wrote "Man created God, not God created Man." So, all in all I think he qualifies as a Humanist.

Interesting as that is, the picture is not about Garibaldi, as I found out about 20 years ago when looking through a poster catalogue and saw it. I bought a copy and read its history. Unfortunately, when I came to look at the poster I could not find my notes or

even its name or that of the artist, nevertheless I sent the picture to Ian for today explaining the absence of information. With a lovely bit of serendipity, Ian was able to tell me both!

So, building on what I already knew I can tell you that the picture is the result of Pellizza having participated in a workers' protest in Turin in 1891. He then produced a number of similar paintings initially the Ambassadors of Hunger, followed by The Human Flood, The River of Humanity, The Path of Workers and finally The Fourth Estate which is what Pellizza called the exploited working class. He wrote this poem about the picture

It is heard ... the River of humanity runs

gently and swells. To remain is a crime.

Philosopher, leave your books to place yourself at its head,

guide it with your studies.

Artist, it brings you with it to ease sadness with

the beauty you know how to present

Worker, leave the bottle which you, for your long labor,

consume

And it brings you with it.

And what do you do? The wife, the child, lead you to

swell

the river of Humanity thirsty

for justice – the justice trampled until now

and now a distant mirage shines.

To me, the painting and these words are an example of Art of a Humanist Hue. I hope you agree."

**A ceramic from the 'Translated Vase Series' of Yee Soo-Kyung (1963 -) was chosen by Ian Hunter**



“Yee Soo-Kyung is a South Korean contemporary artist renowned for her innovative approach to ceramics. She is best known for her ‘Translated Vase’ series, in which she reconstructs broken ceramic fragments, often discards from master potters, using gold lacquer in a process reminiscent of the Japanese kintsugi technique. Her work symbolizes imperfection and renewal, transforming shattered pieces into new, cohesive forms. Her works have been exhibited globally, reflecting a blend of traditional craftsmanship and contemporary artistry.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the breaks with urushi lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Urushi is the sap of the urushi tree. It is a strong adhesive that on hardening becomes extremely durable and produces a glossy finish.



Kintsugi is based on the traditional Japanese philosophy, of 'wabi-sabi' - the celebration of transience and imperfection. The aesthetic is about appreciating beauty that is 'imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete' in nature. It is prevalent in many forms of Japanese art.

A kintsugi piece embodies paradoxes; there's strength and fragility, beauty and imperfection. The concept differs from a western aesthetic tradition. If something breaks, we want to mend it, make it 'perfect' again. We strive for invisible mending. I quote from a bottle of superglue. "LOCTITE Universal ensures durable, long-lasting and invisible repairs" 'Invisible repairs' is the key phrase.

In Kintsugi, the repair is not only highlighted, it is celebrated. Kintsugi is a metaphor for life. It assumes that each piece of ceramic has a story which unfolds from the moment it is fired, a story that might be a few days or many years old. And that in any life story there are times when we are shattered. But the optimism in Kintsugi suggests that we can wear the scars and repair.

So, what is Humanist about it?

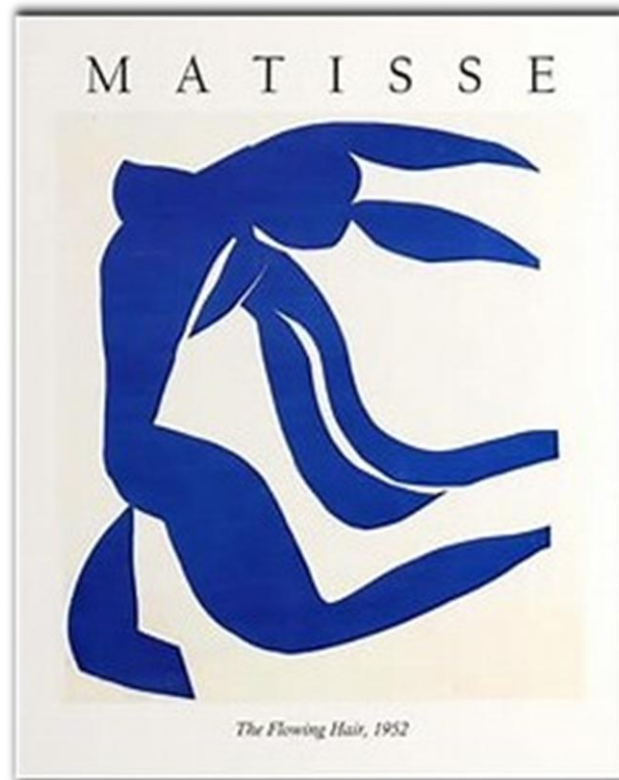
Kintsugi is a celebration of life in its imperfection. When conducting funeral ceremonies, I usually tried, for the benefit of the mourners, to give a plain-English description of a Humanist approach by way of introducing the ceremony. Sometimes, I would use the following words;

'A Humanist funeral celebrates life itself, the everyday and ordinary in the one life we have. Without judgment; life with its doubts, ups and downs, struggles and achievements, hopes and

disappointments, strengths and flaws, joys and sorrows, stories and dreams. Life - in all its imperfect beauty - life to be lived-in and loved.'

In other words, in Humanism we have no concept of Edenic perfection, sin, or judgement; only flaws, mistakes and heartbreaks. We all have experienced them in our own stories. Through Humanism, we can celebrate them. And like in Kkintsugi, we shouldn't try to cover up our flaws, mistakes and heartbreaks. We should wear them as signs of our life's story, as symbols of our common humanity, nothing to be ashamed of, indeed we should gild them with gold and celebrate life itself, cherish the one life we have in all its imperfect beauty."

**Kate Hinton showed us 'The Flowing Hair' by Henri Matisse (1869 – 1954)**



This is one of the many pictures I have hanging in my house – it's on the staircase - so I see it many times a day. You may recognise it.

There are several reasons I have chosen it for today. Firstly, just looking at the picture adds to my feeling of happiness. It has a sense of freedom, joy and energy as well as the bold colour, all of which I love. I suppose it is a bit like our Happy Human. By the way, Matisse didn't claim to be a Humanist but he was an atheist.

From being a child and going to dance classes for many years, I have been drawn to dance but there are few pictures which capture the sense of exhilaration which it gives me. Although not a dance movement, this picture captures the exhilaration of movement.

A second reason comes from knowing how and why Matisse created it in this particular form. It is, of course, one of his famous cut-outs he made in his later life, using large scissors to cut the coloured paper pre-prepared with gouache paint. He took to this medium because he could no longer paint or sculpt on account of the debilitating effects of cancer surgery.

In fact, he had used this technique years earlier, in the 1930s, in the production of stage sets for dance productions. But I am impressed by the way he didn't give up after the surgery but adapted his methods to one that he could physically manage. Now, as is so often the case, behind every great man there is at least one woman! And so, it is for Matisse in the form, not of his wife, but of his assistant Lydia Delectorskaya. She was a Russian refugee who worked for and with Matisse from 1932 to his death. Apparently, they were not lovers but she was a model for many of his portraits, the organiser of his studio and gallery and the technician who prepared, or oversaw the preparation of, the coloured gouache paper for the cut-outs.

Delectorskaya also coordinated the four years of preparation and installation that went into the chapel at Vence, just outside Nice, which I have been to, and which he flooded with blue and yellow light. Of this he said "The chapel is a monument to a religion that has no god but light itself" It is often considered his masterpiece which would not have been possible without Delectorskaya.

In other words, she was a full creative partner, largely unrecognised.

After Matisse's death in 1954 she spent the rest of her life promoting and managing his art legacy. She gave many of his pictures, which he had left to her, to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. She was never given Russian citizenship, although she is buried in a cemetery close to St Petersburg. She died by committing suicide in Paris in 1988, aged 87, burdened by debt. A sad end.

Matisse was also supported by his illegitimate daughter, Marguerite Duthuit Matisse (1894-1982) whom he recognised, which was unusual for the time, and who lived with him and his family for most of her childhood. From 1925 she devoted herself to being Matisse's assistant and agent, supervising exhibitions and cataloguing his work.

So for me this picture has a lot about it that connects with my Humanist beliefs and values.

the energy, freedom and joyfulness of the image

the adaptability and perseverance of the artist in adversity

the role of dedicated, able women, albeit largely unrecognised.

May that change with our and other's efforts.

Sources Afisha, London; Charlotte Barat-Mabille, Paris

**'Christ in the House of His Parents' by John Everett Millais was the choice of Derek Cattell**



“Painted in 1849 by the pre-Raphaelite, Millias. It was very controversial as it depicted Jesus as part of an ordinary family with no halos or holy references. They are in Joseph's workshop. It is, I believe, what we would today call an example of social realism. Charles Dickens condemned the painting as irreverent and disgraceful.

Millais used his own family and friends as models for the painting. Dickens said Mary looked drunk and the others looked like they had rickets. It was also criticised for its vibrant colours and showing Jesus wearing a dress and with red hair.

Although he wasn't keen on the painting, the Victorian art critic John Ruskin defended the artists right to paint it.

When I lived in Birmingham, I would always make a point of seeing the picture, (along with my favourite Millais painting The Blind Girl)

whenever I went to the City Art Gallery. How it ended up now being in the Tate I don't know.

Even today, depicting God in what some might believe to be disrespectful, can be dangerous. The Charlie Hebdo cartoons in France lead to murder, when extremists took offence to caricatures of The Prophet."

**And Jan Mole showed us the huge mural of 'Gala Day', painted by Norman Cornish (1919 – 2014)**



“I have chosen this work by Norman Cornish as for me there are three Humanistic aspects demonstrated by:

The artist who made the most of his talent against the odds.

The painting itself which shows people of all ages enjoying themselves.

My pride in sharing a history with the community and the painting.

Cornish was born in 1919 in Spennymoor, in a house with no bathroom or inside toilet, where he shared a room with his five brothers and one sister. Cornish belonged to a generation denied the opportunity of continuing with education, and he saw working from an early age as a duty to support his immediate family.

Cornish's modest income as a miner was a constraint upon the acquisition of materials. A further dilemma existed between his interest in art and aesthetics, when faced with the hazards he found when working and surviving underground.

One day, working at the coal-face at Mainsforth Colliery, Ferryhill, he was summoned to receive an important telephone call from Durham County Council to commission Norman to paint a Mural typifying life in County Durham, for the new county hall.



Many people have grown to love and appreciate Cornish's work- which has evolved into a regional archive. Not because they'd lived it, but because they absorbed the nuances from his art, and so connected with their past and what has made them who they are today. His observations of people and places are a window into a world which no longer exists outside but which Norman has immortalised for us all with its struggle, its beauty, its squalor and its dignity. His work helps us take pride in our own sense of place, belonging and identity which takes us to the very heart of heritage and culture - thus enabling a continuing and deepening emotional attachment by many of those who appreciate and enjoy his work and interest in his life.

Norman chose to paint a mural of Durham Big Meeting. He visualised the banners as representing the sails of a galleon with three waves of people in the sea of humanity below. All depicted with an undulating rhythm and counter rhythm to suggest movement.

The young people in the wave to the left represent the present and look towards the centre- the future. The elderly folk to the right, representative of the past, turn to the bold central banner which bears the slogan "Unity is Strength"- a symbol of the future. The whole scene represents an allegory of time.

During his research, Norman made numerous drawings of Spennymoor Town Band members in rehearsal to ensure absolute accuracy. At a later stage he added himself and his son John, on his shoulders, (left hand side) as observers rather than participants. It was important for Norman to depict himself as being part of the

miners' annual celebrations that reinforced his sense of belonging, involvement and affinity with his subject.

My Durham Big Meeting was part of my childhood; I was carried on my dad's shoulders until old enough to walk the seven miles from Houghton-le Spring to Durham city following the banner of the local pit. I'm at the back of the first photo aged five.

My first job on leaving school was as a dark room technician at Durham County hospital and the photograph of me on the right, is taken in 1963, Durham Big-Meeting Day, when I watched the parade and also saw the mural displayed in County Hall."



## **In conclusion...**

While interesting to speculate, from such a small sample it isn't possible to draw general conclusions about Humanists and art, so my comments are confined to observations of what was presented and discussed at our seminar.

Most obvious, was a passion for visual art among everyone in attendance; an enthusiasm that refutes the charge - sometimes made - that Humanists are hard-hearted rationalists with a reverence for evidence-driven science, but little else.

The selections certainly emphasised a Humanist world view. From Seoul to New York, Siena to Durham, artists considered were from diverse places and periods of history.

Social-justice was a recurring theme. The allegory of a city well governed, from fourteenth century Siena, depicts social order that is fair and participative. Pellizza's painting of a workers' protest in Turin is full of hope; the participants march into the bright sunshine. With a harder edge is the expressionist work by Jean-Michel Basquiat, challenging convention and advocating for the empowerment of the marginalised.

The world of work was another key theme. Millais' depiction of Christ is set in his father's carpentry workshop, where he is having a splenk removed from his hand. Norman Cornish's huge mural depicting Gala Day is a celebration of the annual Durham Miner's Picnic, in all its splendour.

There were several references to technique, the practical, creative process. 'Strawberry Thief', is a famous William Morris design but the role of his wife Jane Morris (1839 – 1914) is often

overlooked. She was his co-creator in the studio, as is the anonymous maker of the shopping bag displaying the design. The bag is just as important to the totality of the work. Visible technique is also vital in the work of Yee Soo-Kyung in which broken ceramic fragments are joined to form new cohesive works. That the process is exposed is critical to the finished piece. Henri Matisse's 'The Flowing Hair' is a brilliant example of how the artist used scissors and paper in his later years. The works were dismissed as paper jokes, the pictorial maunderings of an old man – but the dazzlingly bright cutouts Matisse made in his last decade show a period of vitality and radical reinvention. Like Morris, Matisse also depended on the support of a woman overlooked by history, his assistant Lydia Delectorskaya.

So, as the time passed, a convivial seminar helped us to shut-out a bitterly cold January afternoon. Good company, tea and cake, memories shared; and Art, in various hues of Humanism, was very much appreciated!

**Ian Hunter (January 2025)**

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